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LETTER

ON THE



WEST INDIA QUESTION,

ADDRESSED TO

THE BRITISH PEOPLE.

BY A FREE TRADER.

"Depend upon it, this business cannot be indifferent to our fame. It will turn out a matter of great disgrace or great glory to the whole British nation. We are on a conspicuous stage, and the world marks our demeanour."

BURKE's *Speech on Mr. Fox's East India Bill.*

LONDON:
SMITH, ELDER AND CO., 65, CORNHILL.

1848.

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London:
Printed by STEWART and MURRAY,
Old Bailey.

A L E T T E R,

&c. &c.

I AM anxious to impress upon the minds of my fellow free-traders, that this is a question which cannot be justly viewed in a purely economic light, and that we can, without the slightest compromise of our general principles, sanction a differential duty in favour of sugar the produce of free labour, and thus *deal honestly* with the West Indians, and prove that our philanthropic professions are not hypocrisy.

Not possessing a dollar in West India property, I cannot perhaps claim the same consideration for my protest against the unjust and fatal policy of England's Premier, as must be accorded to those whose existence depends upon the prosperity of our sugar colonies; but this circumstance should at least pro-

tect me from the imputation of being actuated by mere selfish motives in declaring, as the conclusion to which my personal observation and examination of the work of cane-growing and sugar-making in our colonies has brought me, that our planters with their present difficulties and disadvantages, cannot continue to compete with their rivals in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil.

It must be borne in mind that this is not a question of free labour *versus* slave labour in a temperate climate, where it is the natural impulse of man to be active and energetic, where the low temperature necessitates warm clothing, and reluctant nature yields her fruits only to hardy industry and skill. But it is free labour against slave labour in the *tropics*, where man is by nature indolent and slothful, and feels exertion of either mind or body to be a pain rather than a pleasure, and where nutritious and grateful fruits, of themselves sufficient food for the careless black, in spontaneous abundance invite the plucker's hand—nor in those climes is clothing needed beyond the mere covering of decency.

When we compelled the West Indians to emancipate their slaves, we gave them, it is true, *money* as compensation; but we forbade them to *apply that money* in the only way in which it could effec-

tually and really prove to them a *compensation*. Seeing that, now free, the negroes, high as were the wages offered, could not (very naturally) be induced to labour steadily and continuously day by day, and that, consequently, the labouring power of the colonies was reduced at least one-half, the planters sought relief in the introduction of free labour from Africa. But here they met with opposition from the very quarter to which they confidently looked for cordial approval and prompt assistance. The British Government, notwithstanding its vigorous and costly measures in the cause of African freedom, and its strong expressions of devotion to the elevation and civilization of the negro race, made a decided objection to the plans of the Colonists—thus rejecting the most effectual means (by the instrumentality of returned emigrants) of spreading throughout idolatrous and benighted Africa, the light and liberty-bringing religion and knowledge of England.

Protected by a high differential duty, our planters, in spite of their restricted and uncertain command of labour, and the great increase in their public expenditure entailed by emancipation, were still able by industry and economy to reap a fair profit from the cultivation of their estates.

The measure of Sir Robert Peel reducing the

protection against foreign free labour, was met with good courage and resolution. Short as was the time which had elapsed since emancipation, the position of the planters had greatly improved ; the labourers were beginning to associate less degrading ideas with the work of field labour, and to see and feel the advantages of well-paid industry as a means of gratifying their increasing taste for the comforts and luxuries of civilized life ; their employers, on the other hand, had become more accustomed and reconciled to the independence and free agency of their quondam slaves, and the mutual feeling of irritation created by the sudden change in the relative positions of the two classes, and too generally aggravated and kept alive by the false statements and injudicious conduct of Baptist missionaries and the stipendiary magistrates, had gradually subsided : moreover, by the aid of the plough and other agricultural implements, and the information and encouragement afforded by agricultural societies, the system of cultivation had been greatly improved.

Nor let it be thought that, thus actively and energetically engaged in the advancement of their own interests, the West India Colonists remained unmindful of the wants of their sable fellow-subjects, or neglected to make provision for the exigencies of an advancing state of civilization. Churches and

schools have been founded and built, to an extent that might well put this country to the blush, and person and property are safer throughout those possessions than in any part of England.

Now, I ask, had not the Colonists in doing all this, well and manfully seconded our efforts to raise in the scale of humanity the whole African race, and confound the damnable falsehoods of those who, to justify slavery and oppression, would have it believed that the species was by God ordained to be held in perpetual bondage? Had we not reason to be thankful and rejoice in seeing our labours thus blessed, our sacrifices being thus quickly and bountifully repaid?

In proportion to the extent of the good work thus achieved, will be the magnitude of the guilt of those who destroy it.

Forestalled by Sir Robert Peel in the repeal of the corn laws, and the modification of the sugar duties having been carried out to its full *legitimate* extent by that able statesman; Lord John Russell, on assuming office, anxious to avail himself of any ground of difference, and moreover, doubly anxious to surpass, no matter at what cost, his predecessor in the application of a free-trade policy, brought forward and, owing to the ignorance of the ministry, the houses of Parliament, and the people at large,

of the true merits of the question, carried his fatal Sugar or Slavery Bill.

For its effects, I refer to the disastrous and almost hopeless position of our Colonies ; the depression of all interests in this country, whether manufacturing or commercial, connected with those possessions ; the prosperity and increasing wealth of their rivals ; the unprecedented briskness of the slave-trade ; the repudiation of the noble principles enunciated by this country in 1832 ; and the probability of sugar being ere long at a higher price to the consumer, than it has been for years past.

By a Parliamentary Report lately published, it appears that our annual export trade to the British West India Colonies, containing a population of less than 1,500,000, amounts to nearly 3,000,000*l.*, or more than one-third of our exports to East India and Ceylon, with their 200,000,000 of people.

A comparison with slave-holding countries would, I doubt not, prove equally favourable to our fellow-subjects in the Antilles. Compare the over-worked, half-naked negro slave of Cuba with the well-clad, holiday-making labourer in Jamaica, with his Birmingham saddle and gun, and his wife and children smartly dressed in the prints and muslins of Stockport and Manchester.

On the 24th of July last, the day following Lord George Bentinck's motion for a select committee to receive evidence and report upon the position of our West India Colonies, I sent the following remarks to the editor of the "Colonial Magazine;" and my only motive for now republishing them is a desire to lend my poor but earnest aid to the cause of religion, justice, and humanity, and to assist in awaking my fellow-countrymen to a full knowledge of the rapidity with which ruin is overtaking the prosperity of our planters, and the plans of our philanthropists.

"With an explanation, showing his delay to have been both judicious and politic, Lord George Bentinck, yesterday, the last day of the Session, and on the eve of a general election, presented to the House of Commons a petition from Jamaica, which, little as it may be thought to interest the British public at home, involves principles of vital importance to the British West India Colonies. As his Lordship has pledged himself to move, at an early period in next Session, for a select committee to inquire into the subject, we may expect that he will not fail to strengthen his position with the host of incontrovertible facts with which he can readily be furnished.

"It would appear, by the reply of Mr. Hawes,

that the determination of the people to obtain sugar at a low price justifies any amount of tyranny and injustice towards our Colonies, and sanctifies our unparalleled inconsistency and selfish cruelty in stimulating, as we have done, the slave-trade; in increasing, as we have done, the severity of the slave's murderous toil, and sinking him, if possible, still lower into the depths of demoralization. Another proof that men, collectively, and in their legislative capacity, readily commit acts the very idea of which, individually, and in their private position, they would scout and scorn.

“ Is the Under Secretary for the Colonies aware that the average existence of a negro, from the date of his importation into Cuba, does not exceed eight years? Is he aware that these victims of the damning lust of gain are worked, with scarcely intermission, from sunrise to sunset (twelve hours), and that they are locked up at an early hour, and their food is thrown in to them with less care and kindness than is bestowed on English hounds? Is he aware that, on many estates in the Spanish Colonies, hundreds of men are living without there being with them a single female? Has he never been told, that to such extremities were the Cuba planters reduced for want of a market for their produce, that, had England persevered a few years

longer in her exclusion of slave-grown sugar, they would have been obliged to abolish the slave-trade and emancipate their slaves, or abandon, to a great extent, their cultivation? So convinced were the Brazilians of their critical position, that they had it in serious contemplation to establish perfect freedom, in order to gain admission into the British market.

“I returned, in April last, from Jamaica, after a stay of five months in that magnificent island, and a sojourn of, altogether, fifteen months in the British West India Colonies. During the whole time, I was in close and constant communication with all classes of the community, and availed myself of the excellent opportunities I had of visiting the estates and interior of every Colony of importance, including British Guiana. *I left England a free trader, and I returned with the same ideas. This does not embarrass me. I consider slave labour, with reference to tropical agriculture, to be altogether without the range of the ordinary principles and established axioms of political economy.* Although by no means blind to the great advantages to be derived in our sugar Colonies from more skilful and economical farming, a more careful cultivation of that beautiful and grateful plant the cane, and a greater use of the aids of science in the conversion of its juice into sugar, I conceive and know

it to be unfair and unreasonable to expect our planters—thwarted as they are in all their plans by the difficulty of securing steady continuous labour, and paying, as they do, high daily wages for a half-day's work—to compete with their rivals in Cuba and Puerto Rico.

“ I grant that our West India agriculturists, like their brethren, the corn growers of England, are inclined to be unduly alarmed by an idea of the wonderful powers of production possessed by their foreign competitors. Allowing that their fears are somewhat exaggerated, I yet contend that they are, to a great degree, justified and well founded.

“ We may not be able to repair the fresh wrong we have inflicted on the African race ; we may not be able to restore to our West India Colonies the protection which they once enjoyed, but we are bound to assist them and put them in a position to fight their battle on more equal terms. We have drained from them by one channel the stream of prosperity : we are bound to return it by another.

“ The Colonies want labourers—they are woefully deficient in these sinews of a country—this is a truth that cannot be blinked. Science and economy are powerful engines of improvement, but on the whole they increase rather than supersede the demand for manual labour. What has Govern-

ment done to supply this want? After keeping the West Indians for months on the tenterhooks of expectation and suspense, it has refused to permit them to exercise their own enterprise (under proper supervision) in procuring labourers from the coast of Africa, but has appointed *one* steamer to that duty: the *Growler*—a name aptly representing the grudging will with which this one small act of justice has been done.

“ Mr. Hawes’ remarks respecting the increasing prosperity of Mauritius under the present state of things, are not justified by the actual position of that Colony.* However, for argument’s sake, admitting such to be the fact, it can only be accounted for by that Colony enjoying, and having for some years past enjoyed, the very privileges and advantage for which the West Indies are contending, viz. permission to obtain, under certain restrictions, free labour by private enterprise. It is true that the Mauritians have been prohibited from supplying themselves with labourers from the coast of Africa, but the proximity of India enables them to obtain Coolies at a small expense. The cost of a Cooly’s passage from Calcutta to Mauritius does not

* My opinion was signally verified by the failure within three months of the three great houses interested in the soil of Mauritius.

exceed 5*l.* sterling. The cost of a Cooly's passage from the same port to the West Indies amounts to 16*l.* The expense of returning him at the end of five years will be proportionately much greater. Jamaica, after a trial, far too long, has abandoned the experiment as ruinous. British Guiana and Trinidad, relying on their remarkably rich soil, are persisting in it—they are playing a desperate game: I hope they may succeed in conquering their difficulties. To return to Mauritius: the system of agriculture in that Colony I know to be very rude and imperfect, and far behind that practised in the West Indies; the superiority, therefore, in position and prospects, implied by the remarks of Mr. Hawes, is only to be accounted for by the advantages I have referred to.

“ When men take upon themselves the duties of practical statesmen, (and every statesman to be useful must be practical) they ought to be prepared to apply to particular sores, in the great body of the empire, prompt and special remedies. Our West India Colonies are in a critical position. The scheme of emancipation—the conception of a noble, free, and generous nation, anxious to repair the wrong of two hundred years—by the inconsiderate haste and rash precipitancy with which it was put into execution, prostrated and nearly

destroyed the prosperity of our fellow-subjects in the Antilles ; who for years previously had been the victims of the most cruel and unmanly misrepresentation, emanating from the ignorance of a mania-stricken and morbid philanthropy, and the unscrupulous ambition of unprincipled political adventurers. They were beginning to recover themselves ; a few more years would have restored them to healthy vigour ; when at this very crisis of their existence, impelled by clamour and regardless of justice, we dealt out to them further discouragement, further crushing difficulties. Yet the Colonists do not despair : with manly fortitude and energy, they are labouring to save their ship from wreck. They *literally want hands* to help them to work her. Give them this assistance, and their shattered vessel will yet ride out the storm.”

July 24, 1847.

If, twelve months ago, I was sanguine enough to think that, all other remedial measures being promptly granted, our Colonies might, without the protection of a differential duty, successfully struggle against slavery, I frankly confess that I have now no such hope ; but tremble lest our rulers should refuse to save my fellow-subjects in the Antilles from the *monopoly of the negro market*, and thus not only

restore the cane-field to the forest, but abandon and undo the great work of African freedom and civilization, and create in every British West India Colony, a moral and social wilderness.

N. P.

London, 20th May, 1848.



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